

Consensus decision-making

Consensus decision-making is a group decision making process that seeks not only the agreement of most participants but also the resolution or mitigation of minority objections. Consensus is defined by Merriam-Webster as, first – general agreement and, second – group solidarity of belief or sentiment. It has its origin in a Latin word meaning literally *feel together*.^[1] It is used to describe both general agreement and the process of getting to such agreement. Consensus decision-making is thus concerned primarily with that process.

Objectives

As a decision-making process, consensus decision-making aims to be:^[2]

- **Agreement Seeking:** A consensus decision making process attempts to help participants reach as much agreement as possible.^[2]
- **Collaborative:** Participants contribute to a shared proposal and shape it into a decision that meets the concerns of all group members as much as possible.^[3]
- **Cooperative:** Participants in an effective consensus process should strive to reach the best possible decision for the group and all of its members, rather than competing for personal preferences.
- **Egalitarian:** All members of a consensus decision-making body should be afforded, as much as possible, equal input into the process. All members have the opportunity to present, and amend proposals.
- **Inclusive:** As many stakeholders as possible should be involved in the consensus decision-making process.
- **Participatory:** The consensus process should actively solicit the input and participation of all decision-makers.^[4]

Alternative to common decision-making practices

Consensus decision making is an alternative to commonly practiced non-collaborative decision making processes.^[5]

Robert's Rules of Order, for instance, is a process used by many organizations. The goal of Robert's Rules is to structure the debate and passage of proposals that win approval through majority vote. This process does not emphasize the goal of full agreement. Critics of Robert's Rules believe that the process can involve adversarial debate and the formation of competing factions. These dynamics may harm group member relationships and undermine the ability of a group to cooperatively implement a contentious decision.

Consensus decision making is also an alternative to “top-down” decision making, commonly practiced in **hierarchical** groups. Top-down decision making occurs when leaders of a group make decisions in a way that does not include the participation of all interested stakeholders. The leaders may (or may not) gather input, but they do not open the deliberation process to the whole group. Proposals are not collaboratively developed, and full agreement is not a primary objective. Critics of top-down decision making believe the process fosters incidence of either complacency or rebellion among disempowered group members. Additionally, the resulting decisions may overlook important concerns of those directly affected. Poor group relationship dynamics and decision implementation problems may result.

Consensus decision making addresses the problems of both Robert's Rules of Order and top-down models. The outcomes of the consensus process include:^[3]

- **Better Decisions:** Through including the input of all stakeholders the resulting proposals can best address all potential concerns.
 - **Better Implementation:** A process that includes and respects all parties, and generates as much agreement as possible sets the stage for greater cooperation in implementing the resulting decisions.
 - **Better Group Relationships:** A cooperative, collaborative group atmosphere fosters greater group cohesion and interpersonal connection.
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Decision rules

The level of agreement necessary to finalize a decision is known as a decision rule.^{[3] [6]} The range of possible decision rules varies within the following range:

- Unanimous agreement
- Unanimity minus one vote
- Unanimity minus two votes
- Super majority thresholds (90%, 80%, 75%, two-thirds, and 60% are common).
- Simple majority
- Executive committee decides
- Person-in-charge decides

Some groups require unanimous consent (unanimity) to approve group decisions. If any participant objects, he can block consensus according to the guidelines described below. These groups use the term consensus to denote both the discussion process and the decision rule. Other groups use a consensus process to generate as much agreement as possible, but allow decisions to be finalized with a decision rule that does not require unanimity.

Consensus blocking and other forms of dissent

Groups that require unanimity allow individual participants the option of blocking a group decision. This provision motivates a group to make sure that all group members consent to any new proposal before it is adopted. Proper guidelines for the use of this option, however, are important. The ethics of consensus decision making encourage participants to place the good of the whole group above their own individual preferences. When there is potential for a group decision to be blocked, both the group and any dissenters in the group are encouraged to collaborate until agreement can be reached. Simply vetoing a decision is not considered a responsible use of consensus blocking. Some common guidelines for the use of consensus blocking include:^{[3] [7]}

- Limiting the option to block consensus to issues that are fundamental to the group's mission or potentially disastrous to the group.
- Providing an option for those who do not support a proposal to "stand aside" rather than block.
- Requiring two or more people to block for a proposal to be put aside.
- Requiring the blocking party to supply an alternative proposal or a process for generating one.
- Limiting each person's option to block consensus to a handful of times in one's life.

Dissent options

When a participant does not support a proposal, he does not necessarily need to block it. When a call for consensus on a motion is made, a dissenting delegate has one of three options:

- **Declare reservations:** Group members who are willing to let a motion pass but desire to register their concerns with the group may choose "declare reservations." If there are significant reservations about a motion, the decision-making body may choose to modify or re-word the proposal.^[8]
- **Stand aside:** A "stand aside" may be registered by a group member who has a "serious personal disagreement" with a proposal, but is willing to let the motion pass. Although stand asides do not halt a motion, it is often regarded as a strong "nay vote" and the concerns of group members standing aside are usually addressed by modifications to the proposal. Stand asides may also be registered by users who feel they are incapable of adequately understanding or participating in the proposal.^{[9] [10] [11]}
- **Block:** Any group member may "block" a proposal. In most models, a single block is sufficient to stop a proposal, although some measures of consensus may require more than one block (*see* previous section, "Non-unanimous or modified consensus"). Blocks are generally considered to be an extreme measure, only used when a member feels a proposal "endanger[s] the organization or its participants, or violate[s] the mission of the organization"

(i.e., a principled objection). In some consensus models, a group member opposing a proposal must work with its proponents to find a solution that will work for everyone.^{[12] [13]}

Agreement vs. consent

Unanimity is achieved when the full group consents to a decision. Giving consent does not necessarily mean that the proposal being considered is one's first choice. Group members can vote their consent to a proposal because they choose to cooperate with the direction of the group, rather than insist on their personal preference. Sometimes the vote on a proposal is framed, "Is this proposal something you can live with?" This relaxed threshold for a yes vote can help make unanimity more easily achievable.

Another method to achieve unanimity is by using a special kind of voting process under which all members of the group have a strategic incentive to agree rather than block.^[14]

Process

There are multiple stepwise models of how to make decisions by consensus. They vary in the amount of detail the steps describe. They also vary depending on how decisions are finalized. The basic model involves

- collaboratively generating a proposal,
- identifying unsatisfied concerns, and then
- modifying the proposal to generate as much agreement as possible.

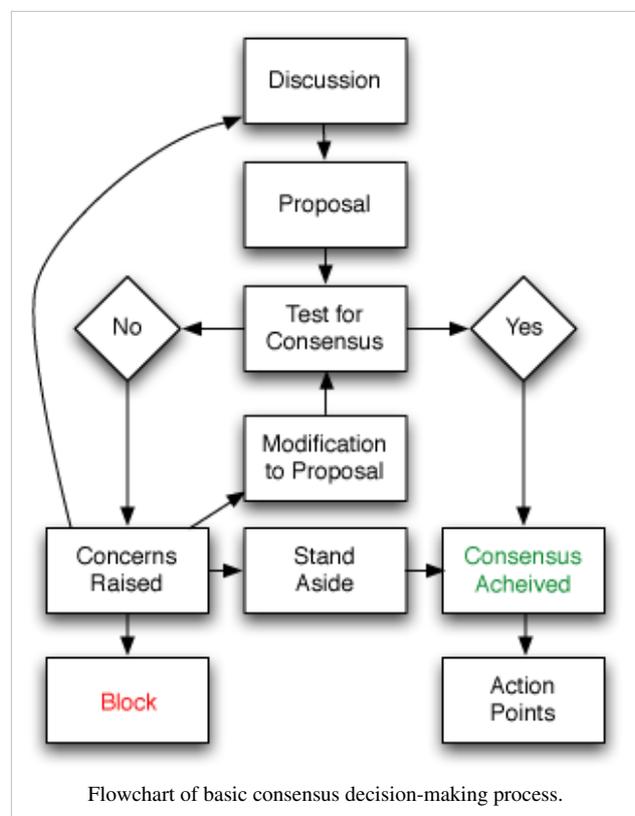
After a concerted attempt at generating full agreement, the group can then apply its final decision rule to determine if the existing level of agreement is sufficient to finalize a decision.

Consensus decision-making with consensus blocking

Groups that require unanimity commonly use a core set of procedures depicted in this flow chart.^{[15] [16] [17]}

Once an agenda for discussion has been set and, optionally, the ground rules for the meeting have been agreed upon, each item of the agenda is addressed in turn. Typically, each decision arising from an agenda item follows through a simple structure:

- **Discussion of the item:** The item is discussed with the goal of identifying opinions and information on the topic at hand. The general direction of the group and potential proposals for action are often identified during the discussion.
- **Formation of a proposal:** Based on the discussion a formal decision proposal on the issue is presented to the group.
- **Call for consensus:** The facilitator of the decision-making body calls for consensus on the proposal. Each member of the group usually must actively state their agreement with the proposal, often by using a hand gesture or raising a colored card, to avoid the group interpreting silence or inaction as agreement.



- **Identification and addressing of concerns:** If consensus is not achieved, each dissenter presents his or her concerns on the proposal, potentially starting another round of discussion to address or clarify the concern.
- **Modification of the proposal:** The proposal is amended, re-phrased or ridered in an attempt to address the concerns of the decision-makers. The process then returns to the call for consensus and the cycle is repeated until a satisfactory decision is made.

Roles

The consensus decision-making process often has several roles which are designed to make the process run more effectively. Although the name and nature of these roles varies from group to group, the most common are the facilitator, a timekeeper, an empath and a secretary or notes taker. Not all decision-making bodies use all of these roles, although the facilitator position is almost always filled, and some groups use supplementary roles, such as a Devil's advocate or greeter. Some decision-making bodies opt to rotate these roles through the group members in order to build the experience and skills of the participants, and prevent any perceived concentration of power.^[15]

The common roles in a consensus meeting are:

- **Facilitator:** As the name implies, the role of the facilitator is to help make the process of reaching a consensus decision easier. Facilitators accept responsibility for moving through the agenda on time; ensuring the group adheres to the mutually agreed-upon mechanics of the consensus process; and, if necessary, suggesting alternate or additional discussion or decision-making techniques, such as go-arounds, break-out groups or role-playing.^[18]
^[19] Some consensus groups use two co-facilitators. Shared facilitation is often adopted to diffuse the perceived power of the facilitator and create a system whereby a co-facilitator can pass off facilitation duties if he or she becomes more personally engaged in a debate.^[20]
- **Timekeeper:** The purpose of the timekeeper is to ensure the decision-making body keeps to the schedule set in the agenda. Effective timekeepers use a variety of techniques to ensure the meeting runs on time including: giving frequent time updates, ample warning of short time, and keeping individual speakers from taking an excessive amount of time.^[15]
- **Empath or 'Vibe Watch':** The empath, or 'vibe watch' as the position is sometimes called, is charged with monitoring the 'emotional climate' of the meeting, taking note of the body language and other non-verbal cues of the participants. Defusing potential emotional conflicts, maintaining a climate free of intimidation and being aware of potentially destructive power dynamics, such as sexism or racism within the decision-making body, are the primary responsibilities of the empath.^[18]
- **Note taker:** The role of the notes taker or secretary is to document the decisions, discussion and action points of the decision-making body.

Near-unanimous consensus

Healthy consensus decision-making processes usually encourage and out dissent early, maximizing the chance of accommodating the views of all minorities. Since unanimity may be difficult to achieve, especially in large groups, or unanimity may be the result of coercion, fear, undue persuasive power or eloquence, inability to comprehend alternatives, or plain impatience with the process of debate, consensus decision making bodies may use an alternative benchmark of consensus. These include the following: (citation needed)

- **Unanimity minus one** (or U-1), requires all delegates but one to support the decision. The individual dissenter cannot block the decision although he or she may be able to prolong debate (e.g. via a filibuster). The dissenter may be the ongoing monitor of the implications of the decision, and their opinion of the outcome of the decision may be solicited at some future time. Betting markets in particular rely on the input of such lone dissenters. A lone bettor against the odds profits when his or her prediction of the outcomes proves to be better than that of the majority. This disciplines the market's odds.

- **Unanimity minus two** (or U-2), does not permit two individual delegates to block a decision and tends to curtail debate with a lone dissenter more quickly. Dissenting *pairs* can present alternate views of what is wrong with the decision under consideration. Pairs of delegates can be empowered to find the common ground that will enable them to convince a third, decision-blocking, decision-maker to join them. If the pair are unable to convince a third party to join them, typically within a set time, their arguments are deemed to be unconvincing.
- **Unanimity minus three**, (or U-3), and other such systems recognize the ability of four or more delegates to actively block a decision. U-3 and lesser degrees of unanimity are usually lumped in with statistical measures of agreement, such as: 80%, mean plus one sigma, two-thirds, or majority levels of agreement. Such measures usually do not fit within the definition of consensus.
- **Rough Consensus** is a process with no specific rule for "how much is enough." Rather, the question of consensus is left to the judgment of the group chair (an example is the IETF working group, discussed below). While this makes it more difficult for a small number of disruptors to block a decision, it puts increased responsibility on the chair, and may lead to divisive debates about whether rough consensus has in fact been correctly identified.

Historical examples

Perhaps the oldest example of consensus decision-making is the Iroquois Confederacy Grand Council, or Haudenosaunee, who have traditionally used consensus in decision-making using a 75% super majority to finalize decisions,^{[21] [22]} potentially as early as 1142.^[23] Examples of consensus decision-making can likely be found among many indigenous peoples, such as the African Bushmen.^[24] Although the modern popularity of consensus decision-making in Western society dates from the women's liberation movement^[25] and anti-nuclear movement^[26] of the 1970s, the origins of formal consensus can be traced significantly farther back.^[27]

Anthropologically, an early practical example from Babylon appeared during a massive awakening amongst the tribe of Abraham, which decided to unite around one principle of Mutual Guarantee^[28] ("Arvut" in Hebrew)^[29]. First, Abraham allowed for their cooperative self-organization to form and then he taught them the quality of Mercy ("Hesed" in Hebrew) and how to unite by having each and every member openly express their desire and due-diligence intention for the acceptance of the rule or law of "Arvut" (mutual guarantee) at their own free will. The only required commitment (accepted with out force) of each member was to put the collective desires in front of their own self-interest desires and only out of this summation of agreements between all participants, the guarantee itself would emerge and would hence promote the well-being of the whole group.

The most notable of early Western consensus practitioners are the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, who adopted the technique as early as the 17th century. The Anabaptists, or Mennonites, too, have a history of using consensus decision-making^[30] and some believe Anabaptists practiced consensus as early as the Martyrs' Synod of 1527.^[27] Some Christians trace consensus decision-making back to the Bible. The Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia references, in particular, Acts 15^[31] as an example of consensus in the New Testament.

Specific models

Quaker model

Quaker-based consensus^[32] is effective because it puts in place a simple, time-tested structure that moves a group towards unity. The Quaker model has been employed in a variety of secular settings. The process allows for individual voices to be heard while providing a mechanism for dealing with disagreements.^{[33] [34]}

The following aspects of the Quaker model can be effectively applied in any consensus decision-making process, and is an adaptation prepared by Earlham College:

- Multiple concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear.
- Discussion involves active listening and sharing information.
- Norms limit number of times one asks to speak to ensure that each speaker is fully heard.

- Ideas and solutions belong to the group; no names are recorded.
- Differences are resolved by discussion. The facilitator ("clerk" or "convenor" in the Quaker model) identifies areas of agreement and names disagreements to push discussion deeper.
- The facilitator articulates the sense of the discussion, asks if there are other concerns, and proposes a "minute" of the decision.
- The group as a whole is responsible for the decision and the decision belongs to the group.
- The facilitator can discern if one who is not uniting with the decision is acting without concern for the group or in selfish interest.
- Dissenters' perspectives are embraced.^[32]

Key components of Quaker-based consensus include a belief in a common humanity and the ability to decide together. The goal is "unity, not unanimity." Ensuring that group members speak only once until others are heard encourages a diversity of thought. The facilitator is understood as serving the group rather than acting as person-in-charge.^[35] In the Quaker model, as with other consensus decision-making processes, by articulating the emerging consensus, members can be clear on the decision, and, as their views have been taken into account, will be likely to support it.^[36]

CODM Model

The Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making^[37] model offers a detailed step-wise description of consensus process. It can be used with any type of decision rule. It outlines the process of how proposals can be collaboratively built with full participation of all stakeholders. This model allows groups to be flexible enough to make decisions when they need to, while still following a format that is based on the primary values of consensus decision making. The CODM steps include:

1. Framing the topic
2. Open Discussion
3. Identifying Underlying Concerns
4. Collaborative Proposal Building
5. Choosing a Direction
6. Synthesizing a Final Proposal
7. Closure

Japan

Japanese companies normally use consensus decision making, meaning that everyone in the company is consulted on each decision. A ringi-sho is a circulation document used to obtain agreement. It must first be signed by the lowest level manager, and then upwards, and may need to be revised and the process started over.^[38]

IETF rough consensus model

In the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), decisions are assumed to be taken by "rough consensus".^[39] The IETF has studiously refrained from defining a mechanical method for verifying such consensus, apparently in the belief that any such codification will lead to attempts to "game the system." Instead, a working group (WG) chair or BoF chair is supposed to articulate the "sense of the group."

One tradition in support of rough consensus is the tradition of humming rather than (countable) hand-raising; this allows a group to quickly tell the difference between "one or two objectors" or a "sharply divided community", without making it easy to slip into "majority rule".^[40]

Much of the business of the IETF is carried out on mailing lists, where all parties can speak their view at all times.

Other modern examples

The ISO process for adopting new standards is called consensus-based decision making,^[41] even though in practice, it is a complex voting process with significant supermajorities needed for agreement.^[42]

Overlaps with deliberative methods

Consensus decision-making models overlap significantly with deliberative methods, which is the name academics such as political scientists use to describe consensus models.

Tools and methods

Colored cards

Some consensus decision-making bodies use a system of colored cards to speed up and ease the consensus process. Most often, each member is given a set of three colored cards: red, yellow and green. The cards can be raised during the process to indicate the member's input. Cards can be used during the discussion phase as well as during a call for consensus. The cards have different meanings depending on the phase in which they are used.^[43] ^[13] The meaning of the colors are:

- **Red:** During discussion, a red card is used to indicate a point of process or a breach of the agreed upon procedures. Identifying offtopic discussions, speakers going over allowed time limits or other breaks in the process are uses for the red card. During a call for consensus, the red card indicates the member's opposition (usually a "principled objection") to the proposal at hand. When a member, or members, use a red card, it becomes their responsibility to work with the proposing committee to come up with a solution that will work for everyone.
- **Yellow:** In the discussion phase, the yellow card is used to indicate a member's ability to clarify a point being discussed or answer a question being posed. Yellow is used during a call for consensus to register a stand aside to the proposal or to formally state any reservations.
- **Green:** A group member can use a green card during discussion to be added to the speakers list. During a call for consensus, the green card indicates consent.

Some decision-making bodies use a modified version of the colored card system with additional colors, such as orange to indicate a non-blocking reservation stronger than a stand-aside.^[44]

Hand signals

Hand signals are often used by consensus decision-making bodies as a way for group members to nonverbally indicate their opinions or positions. Although the nature and meaning of individual gestures varies from group to group, there is a widely-adopted core set of hand signals. These include: wiggling of the fingers on both hands, a gesture sometimes referred to as "twinkling", to indicate agreement; raising a fist or crossing both forearms with hands in fists to indicate a block or strong disagreement; and making a "T" shape with both hands, the "time out" gesture, to call attention to a point of process or order.^[19] ^[45] ^[46] One common set of hand signals is called the "Fist-to-Five" or "Fist-of-Five". In this method each member of the group can hold up a fist to indicate blocking consensus, one finger to suggest changes, two fingers to discuss minor issues, three fingers to indicate willingness to let issue pass without further discussion, four fingers to affirm the decision as a good idea, and five fingers to volunteer to take a lead in implementing the decision.^[47]

Another common set of hand signals used is the "Thumbs" method, where Thumbs Up = agreement; Thumbs Sideways = have concerns but won't block consensus; and Thumbs Down = I don't agree and I won't accept this proposal. This method is also useful for "straw polls" to take a quick reading of the group's overall sentiment for the active proposal.

Dotmocracy sheets

Dotmocracy sheets are designed to compliment a consensus decision-making process by providing a simple way to visibly document levels of agreement among participants on a large variety of ideas.^[48] Participants write down ideas on paper forms called *Dotmocracy sheets* and fill in one dot per sheet to record their opinion of each idea on a scale of “strong agreement”, “agreement”, “neutral”, “disagreement”, “strong disagreement” or “confusion”. Participants sign each sheet they dot and may add brief comments. The result is a graph-like visual representation of the group's collective opinions on each idea.

The *Step-by-Step Process* and *Rules* defined in the *Dotmocracy Handbook*^[49] reinforce consensus decision-making by promoting equal opportunity, open discussion, the drafting of many proposals, the identification of concerns and the encouragement of idea modification.

The image shows a completed Dotmocracy sheet. At the top, it says 'Session name: Cultural shift' and 'Grid #: 54'. Below that, there are handwritten notes: 'Create central bike calendar for all groups', 'In table to upload to, to list all 100th bike clubs'. The 'Do you agree?' section has six columns with smiley faces and question marks, representing different levels of agreement. Below this are two sections: 'Strengths & Opportunities' and 'Concerns & Weaknesses', both with handwritten notes. The bottom right corner has 'dotmocracy.org' and a signature column.

Completed Dotmocracy sheet

Fall-back methods

Sometimes some common form of voting such as First-past-the-post is used as a *fall-back method* when consensus cannot be reached within a given time frame.^[50] However, if the potential outcome of the fall-back method can be anticipated, then those who support that outcome have incentives to block consensus so that the fall-back method gets applied. Special fall-back methods have been developed that reduce this incentive.^[14]

The idea of consensus in the abstract

This article focuses strictly on the idea of consensus in the abstract, not on the implications of consensus for politics or economics, where follow-up action is required.

Consensus as collective thought

A close equivalent phrase might be the "collective agreement" of a group, keeping in mind that a high degree of variation is still possible among individuals, and certainly if there must be individual commitment to follow up the decision with action, this variation remains important. There is considerable debate and research into both collective intelligence and consensus decision-making.

Consensus usually involves collaboration, rather than compromise. Instead of one opinion being adopted by a plurality, stakeholders are brought together (often with facilitation) until a convergent decision is developed. If this is done in a purely mechanical way it can result in simple trading—we'll sacrifice this if you'll sacrifice that. Genuine consensus typically requires more focus on developing the relationships among stakeholders, so that they work together to achieve agreements based on willing consent.

Abstract models of consensus

The most common and most successful model of consensus is called the prisoner's dilemma. An introduction and discussion of this concept can be found in any contemporary introduction to political science. This approach might be called "algebraic" as opposed to analytic, within mathematics, because it represents an agent by a symbol and then examines the algebraic properties of that symbol. For example, the question, "Can two agents be combined to make a new agent?" sounds like an algebraic question. (More formally, "is the operation of consensus closed in the domain of agents? Is there a larger domain of "abstract agents" in which this operation is closed?")

In a more analytic style, we might naively start by envisioning the distribution of opinions in a population as a Gaussian distribution in one parameter. We would then say that the initial step in a consensus process would be the written or spoken synthesis that represents the range of opinions within perhaps three standard deviations of the mean opinion. Other standards are possible, e.g. two standard deviations, or one, or a unanimity minus a certain tolerable number of dissenters. The following steps then operate both to check understanding of the different opinions (parameter values), and then to find **new** parameters in the multi-dimensional parameter space of all possible decisions, through which the consensus failure in one-dimensional parameter space can be replaced by a solution in multi-dimensional parameter space.

An alternative, qualitative, mathematical description is to say that there is an iterative process through $(m+n)$ -dimensional parameter space, starting from initial guesses at a solution in (m) -dimensional parameter space, which tries to converge to find a common solution in $(m+n)$ -dimensional parameter space.

A criticism of such modeling is that the opinions or agreements are only theoretical, and that the strength or degree of conviction as measured is not closely correlated to the willingness of any given individual to take action. In direct action politics, the consensus is constantly tested by asking those who agree to immediately place their own bodies 'on the line' and in harm's way, to actually demonstrate that they are committed to a consensus. The ecology movement, peace movement, and labor movement have historically required such demonstrations of commitment. Some have disdained any attempt at formal models or methods, but others have prepared extensive documentation on both formal and informal consensus decision-making processes.

Typically, the usefulness of formal models of consensus is confined to cases where follow up action is closely and centrally controlled, e.g. in a military hierarchy or a set of similar computer programs executing on hardware that it completely controls. The idea of consensus itself is probably quite different when considering action by a group of independent human agents, or considering action by those taking orders and committed to executing them all without question, or suffering great harm or exile for any disobedience.

Consensus upon a particular formal model of consensus can lead to groupthink, by making it harder for those who reject that formal model (and using informal or different models) to be heard. This recursion suggests the extreme complexity of reasoning about consensus in a political context. An example is the peace movement's objection to the game theory logic of mutual assured destruction during the Cold War. Peace activists, objecting to military goals and spending found the formal models of the military to be major obstacles. As they had not mastered game theory models they simply were not heard.

In democracy

As this example suggests, the concept of consensus is a particularly important one in the context of society and government, and forms a cornerstone of the concept of democracy. Democracy, in its most essential form, direct democracy, has been criticized by a significant number of scholars since the time of Plato as well as adherents to strict republican principles, and is sometimes referred to as the "tyranny of the majority", with the implication that one faction of the society is dominating other factions, possibly repressively.

Others, however, argue that if the democracy adheres to principles of consensus, becoming a deliberative democracy, then party or factional dominance can be minimized and decisions will be more representative of the entire society. This too is discussed in depth in the article on consensus decision-making, with many actual examples of the tradeoffs and different tests for consensus used in actual societies and polities.

A major cornerstone of the Westminster System is Cabinet Government. All Cabinet decisions are consensual collective and inclusive, a vote is never taken in a Cabinet meeting. All ministers, whether senior and in the Cabinet, or junior ministers, must support the policy of the government publicly regardless of any private reservations. If a minister does not agree with a decision, he or she may resign from the government; as did several British ministers over the 2003 Invasion of Iraq. This means that in the Westminster system of government the cabinet always collectively decides all decisions and all ministers are responsible for arguing in favour of any decision made by the

cabinet.

See also: Criticisms of Consensus decision-making.

Examples within computing

Within the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the concept of "rough consensus and running code" is the basis for the standardization process. It has proven extremely effective for standardizing protocols for inter-computer communication, particularly during its early years.

In computer science, consensus is a distributed computing problem in which a group of nodes must reach agreement on a single value. Achieving consensus is a challenging problem in distributed systems, particularly as the number of nodes grows or the reliability of links between nodes decreases.

"Consensus" may also refer to the *Consensus theorems* in Boolean algebra.

Examples of non-consensus

The peer review process in most scientific journals does not use a consensus based process. Referees submit their opinions individually and there is not a strong effort to reach a group opinion.

Criticism

Consensus blocking

Critics of consensus blocking often observe that the option, while potentially effective for small groups of motivated or trained individuals with a sufficiently high degree of affinity, has a number of possible shortcomings, notably

- **Preservation of the Status quo:** In decision-making bodies that use formal consensus, the ability of individuals or small minorities to block agreement gives an enormous advantage to anyone who supports the existing state of affairs. This can mean that a specific state of affairs can continue to exist in an organization long after a majority of members would like it to change.^[51] The incentive to block can however be removed by using a special kind of voting process.^[14]
- **Susceptibility to widespread disagreement:** Giving the right to block proposals to all group members may result in the group becoming hostage to an inflexible minority or individual. When a popular proposal is blocked the group actually experiences widespread disagreement, the opposite of the consensus process's goal. Furthermore, "opposing such obstructive behavior [can be] construed as an attack on freedom of speech and in turn [harden] resolve on the part of the individual to defend his or her position."^[52] As a result, consensus decision-making has the potential to reward the least accommodating group members while punishing the most accommodating.

Consensus decision-making

- **Abilene paradox:** Consensus decision-making is susceptible to all forms of groupthink, the most dramatic being the Abilene paradox. In the Abilene paradox, a group can unanimously agree on a course of action that no individual member of the group desires because no one individual is willing to go against the perceived will of the decision-making body.^[53]
- **Time Consuming:** Since consensus decision-making focuses on discussion and seeks the input of all participants, it can be a time-consuming process. This is a potential liability in situations where decisions need to be made speedily or where it is not possible to canvass the opinions of all delegates in a reasonable period of time. Additionally, the time commitment required to engage in the consensus decision-making process can sometimes act as a barrier to participation for individuals unable or unwilling to make the commitment.^[54] However, once a decision has been reached it can be acted on more quickly than a decision handed down. American businessmen complained that in negotiations with a Japanese company, they had to discuss the idea with everyone even the

janitor, yet once a decision was made the Americans found the Japanese were able to act much quicker because everyone was on board, while the Americans had to struggle with internal opposition.^[55]

Majority voting processes

Proponents of consensus decision-making view procedures that use majority rule as undesirable for several reasons. Majority voting is regarded as competitive, rather than cooperative, framing decision-making in a win/lose dichotomy that ignores the possibility of compromise or other mutually beneficial solutions.^[56] Carlos Santiago Nino, on the other hand, has argued that majority rule leads to better deliberation practice than the alternatives, because it requires each member of the group to make arguments that appeal to at least half the participants.^[57] A. Lijphart reaches the same conclusion about majority rule, noting that majority rule encourages coalition-building.^[58] Additionally, proponents of consensus argue that majority rule can lead to a 'tyranny of the majority'. Voting theorists argue that majority rule may actually prevent tyranny of the majority, in part because it maximizes the potential for a minority to form a coalition that can overturn an unsatisfactory decision.^[58]

Advocates of consensus would assert that a majority decision reduces the commitment of each individual decision-maker to the decision. Members of a minority position may feel less commitment to a majority decision, and even majority voters who may have taken their positions along party or bloc lines may have a sense of reduced responsibility for the ultimate decision. The result of this reduced commitment, according to many consensus proponents, is potentially less willingness to defend or act upon the decision.

Notes

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